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An artist's rendering shows the Great Lawn area of the planned River's Edge Park in Council Bluffs.

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Riverfront renaissance

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COUNCIL BLUFFS — Construction should start this fall on a "signature" Council Bluffs park that ultimately will offer 85 acres for recreation, outdoor movies and concerts, hiking, biking and other uses.

The riverfront park will be developed at the eastern end of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge that links Council Bluffs and Omaha.

The Iowa West Foundation has committed $5.45 million over the next two years for construction, with the same amount to be matched by the city through its capital improvement program. The money will fund the first and largest of three phases of construction of what has a working title of River's Edge Park.

Council Bluffs Parks Director Larry Foster, who spent many years with the Omaha Parks and Recreation Department, said a project of this magnitude hasn't been attempted in the region since the six-block Gene Leahy Mall was built in downtown Omaha in the mid-1970s.

"This is the kind of vision we haven't done in a long time," Foster said. "We wanted a place for the community to come and recreate and celebrate."

The park will stretch well north of the Council Bluffs landing of the pedestrian bridge — an area currently tree-covered and undeveloped — and south to Harrah's Casino & Hotel. A two-lane park road will meander for a mile through the park, and paved walking-biking trails will connect to the pedestrian bridge as well as existing city trails.

At the heart of this new endeavor will be a six-acre "Great Lawn" where people can relax, walk pets, play Frisbee or enjoy an evening movie or concert, all with the Omaha skyline in the background.

"What a beautiful backdrop for an evening concert," said Todd Graham, president and CEO of the Iowa West Foundation.

A large sand area — complete with "funbrellas" — for play, relaxation and just "watching the river go by" is planned for the area immediately west of the Great Lawn.

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Features to be phased in
Phase I
>> Great Lawn six-acre greenspace
>> Large sand area with "funbrellas."
>> Pavilions, between the Great Lawn and parking lot.

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A fountain is planned on the east side of the lawn. A portion of the fountain space is to provide an area for ice skating during the winter.

Phase I should be open to the public by spring 2012. No timetable or price tag has been set yet for the remaining segments.

The park's design incorporates suggestions drawn from numerous public meetings held over a year's time, the officials said, plus the experience of the Sasaki design firm, which is known for its waterfront work.

But Mayor Tom Hanafan said the idea actually dates to the mid-1980s when a group of "visionaries" saw something good in the Missouri River. "It was always a negative factor," he said of the river's image.

The Back to the River organization was formed in 1987 to lure people to the riverfront for recreation, socializing, education and economic development, Hanafan said.

The Omaha side has seen plenty of economic development related to the riverfront renaissance, he said.

"Our side was always intended to be the natural side," Hanafan said.

Foster added: "Our plan is all about green space, open space."

>> Road extending south from near the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge to Harrah's Casino & Hotel.
>> Hiking-biking trail alongside the new road.
>> Parking lot for 140 vehicles, adjacent to the Great Lawn.

Phase II
>> Fountain area, which will be used as an ice rink in the winter.
>> Concession stand with restrooms.
>> Start of work on hiking-biking trails extending north of the bridge.
>> Parking lot for 148 vehicles under the Interstate 480 bridge.

Phase III
>> Completion of road through the north parkland area.
>> Completion of hiking-biking trail loop within the north parkland area.
>> Park shelters.
>> Parking lot turnaround with 20 spaces

The new park will be built entirely west of the Missouri River levee, on the so-called "wet side."

But officials said it was designed with flooding in mind. For example, the land will gradually rise as it continues east from the riverbank to reduce damage from river flooding. Fill dirt will raise the area that will be transformed into the Great Lawn. A high pressure water system will be included to wash down trails. And the sand area will be raked and retopped as needed.

"The space was designed for quick recovery" and cleanup from any flooding, said Jerry Mathiasen, senior vice president of the Iowa West Foundation.

Construction practices will be green, Foster said. For every tree removed to create the Great Lawn, for example, two to three will be planted elsewhere in the park. And the park will feature bioswales rather than traditional curbs and gutters that move water into a piped disposal system. The bioswales filter out impurities naturally and allow the water to soak into the ground instead of flowing into the river, Foster said.

About 1,300 parking stalls will be available, most in a lot now used by Harrah's patrons. But some will be built under the Interstate 480 bridge and the remainder by the Great Lawn.

Hanafan said the biggest complaint he's heard from users of the pedestrian bridge is a lack of nearby parking. He added that the parking in the new riverfront park will move parked vehicles off nearby residential streets.

For Iowa West, this week's funding announcement continues a multiyear, multimillion-dollar commitment to riverfront development. Graham noted that the foundation has provided $1 million toward the pedestrian bridge construction, another $2 million for infrastructure for the planned Playland Park multi-use project that would be just to the east of the new park and $1 million for the new riverfront park's master plan.

The Playland project includes housing — single-family houses and condos — and commercial development. Grading is under way at that site, on the "dry side" of the levee.

The planning effort for the new park included a search for "the finest riverfront landscape designers in the business," Graham said. "Sasaki is the best of the best."

The suburban Boston-based firm has expertise in designing in floodplains and has done major waterfront projects in such place as Washington, D.C., Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Detroit and Cleveland. Sasaki created the Cedar Rapids River Corridor Redevelopment Plan after the city's record flood in June 2008.

The park could spur other projects down the road, Iowa West's Graham said.

"We see it as a catalyst for future growth and development," he said. "Cities need to provide unique, high-quality amenities that will bring families and businesses to the community."

Mayor Hanafan added: "It's about livability, and we're competing against all large cities in the United States."

The $5.6 million in city funds is coming out of its Capital Improvement Plan, which already has been approved by the City Council.

The council Monday evening will vote to accept the Iowa West grant and the overall plans. The council also will consider the transfer of land ownership from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to the city.

World-Herald staff member Dave Croy contributed to this report.

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